
Reingard M. Nischik (ed.). *The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative North American Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 417 pp., \$ 195.00 (hb)/ \$ 54.99 (pb [2016]).

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DOI 10.1515/ang-2017-0041

The aim of *The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative North American Literature* is to “chart relevant methodologies and major issues of Comparative North American Literature” (3). This happens at a time when borders and definitions of North American Studies are in constant negotiation caused by the rise of “globalizing tendencies not only in economics, politics, and technology, but also in the context of literature and culture” (3). Rather than merely summarizing and showcasing major developments and issues, this *Handbook* pursues a programmatic objective. Its editor, Reingard Nischik, aims to establish “Comparative North American Studies” as a methodological tool, despite challenges and intricacies that are inscribed into the concept of ‘North American literature’ itself. As Nischik argues,

what we regard as ‘American Studies’ or ‘North American Studies’ does not refer to clear-cut geographies and agendas, but is subject to political, institutional, and, last but not least, personal practices, which are geared to traditions and cultural hierarchies, yet may change over time. (5)

Thus, the term ‘North America’ has been submitted to various geo-political definitions, often at the expense of Mexico, considered by many as part of South America rather than North America. The artificiality of the US-American/Canadian border for many Canadian First Nations and Native American communities is another example of the difficulty that arises when ‘North American’ functions as a marker of ‘home’. The terminological issues are grave. In her Introduction, Reingard Nischik maintains that new developments in the orbit of global literary studies – such as hemispheric approaches or border studies – add important perspectives, but do not necessarily help to clarify these issues, let alone assist scholars with methodological questions.

The concerns and debates which *The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative North American Literature* traces require a framework sensitive to the specific historical, cultural, and geographical conditions of North America, understood in an encompassing sense, i.e., including the United States, the English and French-speaking part of Canada, and Mexico. North America hosts different ethnic cultures and languages. It is defined and diversified by political, geographical, and cultural borders. Further complicating factors are the contestability of the term ‘nation’ in a Canadian context, or the perceived threats to a Canadian identity contained in ‘American’, reflecting the continentalist assumption that there must be close family ties between the United States and Canada (10). Some of today’s most talked about transnational approaches are prone to a flattening of regional and cultural differences given their implementation of bigger, ‘hemispheric’ divisions between North and South, overlooking the interconnectedness and interdependence of regions and ethnic groups (18).

Comparative North American Studies “form a promising, timely paradigm for dealing with the literatures and cultures of the United States and Canada” (3). The term stands for a widened understanding of comparative literature, placed right at the core of cultural studies and essentially shaped by its transnational, multicultural, culture-oriented, and interdisciplinary outlook (16). Nischik defines it as “one small step toward [...] a global orientation” (13), whose contribution to transnational or global literary studies is its methodological suitability. Comparative North American Studies seek to integrate difference and ambiguity without losing sight of the important role that the idea of a ‘national literature’ plays on both sides of borders. While committed to a “decentering of the view of individual countries and cultures” (17), this concept does not displace “identity-based approaches” (18). As Katja Sarkowsky shows in her chapter on “Comparing Indigenous Literatures in Canada and the United States”, such a comparative approach depends on “[...] frameworks [which] encompass a number of dynamic and contextually shifting communities: tribal, pan-tribal, national, transnational, even global” (99), i.e., notions of identity

and community are called for that, importantly, are not restricted to US-American/Canadian comparisons.

The 17 chapters form five sections. Beginning with “Charting the Territory”, these include “Perspectives on Multiculturalism”, “French-Language and English-Language Cultures in North America”, “Regions and Symbolic Spaces”, and “National, Transnational, Global Perspectives”. Individual chapters deal with topics as varied as indigenous studies (Katja Sarkowsky), race (Eva Gruber), immigration and citizenship (Mita Banerjee), borders (Monika Giacoppe, Claudia Sadowski-Smith), depictions of the North (Christina Kannenberg), comparative Canadian studies (Marie Vautier), urban literature (Caroline Rosenthal), and (post-)modernism (Jutta Ernst, Julia Breitbach). Some of these chapters provide comparative surveys of traditional key issues in North American Studies, such as multiculturalism (Sabine Sielke) and regionalism (Florian Freitag), while others look at more specific subjects (Lorraine York on literary celebrity in the United States and Canada; Georgiana Banita on war and transnationalism). The chapters in the *Handbook* bring into harmony the persistent need for identity articulated by North American literary texts with calls for their ‘global’ interpretation, putting into practice the methodology its editor proposes. The chapters by Gruber, Sarkowsky, Breitbach, and York are particularly recommendable reads.

The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative North American Literature will appeal to scholars and students interested in the manifold interrelations and transactions between the literatures of North America. Its articles are highly informative, well written and researched. They all summarize important debates and research traditions in their respective fields. The *Handbook* will also be helpful for readers with a specific interest in the politics that have shaped American studies as a discipline in the last couple of decades. Given the surge of new terms and approaches meant to redefine the discipline, the clarification of methodological questions and challenges as accomplished by Reingard Nischik and her contributors serves as a valuable timely contribution to on-going debates.